

Summary

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The concept of the unity of personality in the philosophical and painterly work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

This dissertation is an attempt at answering the question about the role performed by the concept of the unity of personality in the theoretical output and the painterly work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. This question pertains in equal measure to the meaning of this concept – the multiplicity of its explications found in Witkiewicz’s theoretical writings – and to the function it played in establishing relations between the disciplines of ontology and aesthetics developed by him, and between Witkiewicz’s theoretical output in general and his artistic practice.

The aim of the dissertation is to explore the meaningful potential of the concept of the title by means of revealing tensions and points of disturbed consistency between the theses of Witkiewicz’s mature ontology, aesthetics and his early metaphysics. These relations are discussed both in their diachronic and synchronic dimensions – in the sense of gradual development of Witkiewicz’s ontological system and in terms of the complexity of relationships between the disciplines. Such a multisided reading makes it possible to reveal the connotations of the concept of the unity of personality which were disregarded in the interpretations based on the theses of Witkiewicz’s mature ontology only. In addition, the proposed approach allows to disclose the artistic dimension of Witkiewicz’s ontology and to recognize the ontological aspects of his painting.

In the place of earlier interpretations which frequently discussed Witkiewicz’s ontology in separation from other domains of his creative output, I propose the multi-dimensional interpretation – the kind of archaeology aimed at diversifying the meaning of the concepts and theorems constitutive of his system of “general ontology” and at reaching those layers of meaning which relate these concepts and theorems to his early metaphysics. Such an attempt at endowing ontology with spatial character is achieved by means of associating it with Witkiewicz’s painting created according to the principles of “pure form”. It is my aim to distinguish the principle which makes it possible to draw an analogy between the linear order of concepts and theorems in Witkiewicz’s ontology and the spatial order constructed in his painterly compositions. In other words, what is at stake in this project is establishing an

analogy between the orders of truth and form – as Witkiewicz understood them – according to certain principles.

Despite the fact that Witkiewicz used philosophical statements as constructive elements in his literary works, in his theoretical texts he distinguished strictly between the order of “Absolute Truth”, pertaining to the domain of philosophy, and the order of “Individual Identity”, pertaining to the domain of art and literature. Referring to this distinction, in my work I intend to disclose a certain ontological dimension of Witkiewicz’s painterly and literary works by means of confronting their formal aspects, selected iconographic motives in his paintings and drawings and selected literary fragments with the ontological theses formulated in his theoretical works. This approach makes it possible, in my opinion, to avoid considering Witkiewicz’s visual works as illustrative to his philosophy and maintaining their artistic integrity. In my analyses, what links the domains of ontology and art is the correspondence – or partial overlapping – between the meaning of the concept of “double spatial-temporal form of being”, known from Witkiewicz’s ontological considerations, and the meaning of the concept of artwork’s pure form, the central category in his aesthetics.

The dissertation provides an overview and an explication of a number of ontological questions discussed by Witkiewicz. The first chapter associates the concept of the unity of self, formulated by Witkiewicz in his early writings, with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who described a subjective unity in terms of a “better consciousness” who is released from the causal order of the phenomenal world and perceives it from the perspective of the “eternal present”. The concept of the unity of self, named also by young Witkiewicz a “metaphysical feeling”, entails the conception of a painterly work explicated by him in the novel 622 *Downfalls of Bungo* in terms of an ornamental arrangement of forms on a rectangular surface – an arrangement reflective of the unity of being in its entirety. This conception bespeaks of the formula for Witkiewicz’s painterly Symbolism; the first chapter of the dissertation confronts his early conception of a painterly work with the ideas worked out by the theoreticians of the French Symbolism. These authors commented upon the painterly formation of Synthetism in terms of discovering a metaphysical truth inherent in the changeable appearances of things. The end part of the first chapter describes the internal tension in Witkiewicz’s early paintings – or the oscillation – between the painterly surface and the optical depth, the tension which determines the circular aspect of the process of perception

– the process of analytical entering the optical depth of a painting and the withdrawal from it in the synthetic overview of a painting’s formal structure.

The second chapter explicates the meaning of the concept of the unity of personality according to the way in which this concept is defined in Witkiewicz’s ontological and aesthetic writings from the interwar period. In this chapter, I confront the theological aspect of the idea of subjective unity formulated during the early stage of Witkiewicz’s philosophical development with its explication formulated in the language of empiriocriticism (this philosophical formation was also named in Poland with the term “psychologism”) in his mature ontological writings. In addition to the concept of the unity of personality, I discuss other concepts of Witkiewicz’s ontology: the individual being (equivalent to the notion of a living entity), his or her duration and extension, being in its entirety conceived as inseparable from its infinite spatial-temporal form. I highlight that aspect of the concept of the unity of personality which differentiates it from the related conception of Hans Cornelius – its immediate character described by Witkiewicz in terms of the Gestalt quality of the whole of individual being’s duration. I differentiate between the notions which are commonly interpreted as synonyms: the unity of personality, the metaphysical feeling, the metaphysical anxiety. I consider the significance of the concept of the double spatial-temporal form of being for the way in which Witkiewicz constructed his system of ontology and designed his system of aesthetics. I diagnose the relative independence of Witkiewicz’s mature ontology from his aesthetics and highlight the function of the concept of the unity of personality as a common element between the two disciplines.

In the second chapter of the work, I also discuss the ontological notion of the limited real space surrounding an individual being, in the sense of the field of perception ascribed to a living entity, as the equivalent of the optical depth in a painterly work. I describe the mode of constructing an internal space of a painting which – as Witkiewicz recommended – should be reflective of the primal vision standing at the origin of the creative process. I refer to the concept of an artistic *epoché*, described by Witkiewicz in the novel *The Only Way Out*, consisting in an annihilation of the world of everyday experience, conducted in imagination with an aim of disclosing the said primal vision – the domain of the virtual, pulsating with life. I also comment upon the direct and original aspect of the experience of the unity of personality by means of confronting the disinterested character of an artistic attitude, founded in Witkiewicz’s ontological and aesthetic premises, with Umberto Boccioni’s artistic activism which was motivated by premises taken over from Henri Bergson’s intuitionism.

According to Witkiewicz's theory, a painterly composition is a symbol of personal integrity of its creator – it embraces clusters of experiences as if projected outwards in inimitable configuration on a painterly surface by the force of an original creative impulse. At the same time, it expresses the principle of being as considered in its entirety – the unity in multiplicity of its elements. This is what Witkiewicz's formula of "direct symbolism" consists in, different in its character from partial versions of Symbolism enacted by the Synthetists, who used to capture the essences of selected fragments of reality. In the third chapter of the work, in search for the ontological dimension of Witkiewicz's paintings, I also discuss his principles of constructing a painterly composition in terms of establishing an internal painterly space. I make an attempt at distinguishing the kind of ontological iconography of Witkiewicz's paintings which is articulated by the linear structure of his works. Dynamic course of line in his drawings and paintings evoke tactile and kinetic impressions as experienced by the individuals visible in them. Ontological iconography, inscribed in Witkiewicz's paintings, is the iconography of the sense of touch; this explains the effects of anamorphosis which are frequent in his visual works.

The tensions between shapes distributed in Witkiewicz's compositions evoke the effects of movement; this inspired me to compare Witkiewicz's painterly practice with the program of Cubism and to highlight important differences between the theoretical premises behind painterly practices of Witkiewicz and Boccioni. In the third chapter I also focus upon the conceptual dimension of Witkiewicz's paintings; the "directional tensions" are frequently strengthened in his drawings by the verbal commentaries. Making use of the selected theses from Witkiewicz's ontology as the means for strengthening the directional tensions in his pictures, I discuss the two-fold meaning of movement decipherable in them. Linear structure of Witkiewicz's visual works – internal tensions, compressions and shifts of objective forms – involve the notion of movement both in the subjective sense – as the change in location of the complex of sense impressions in the individual being's real space, and in the objective sense – as the change in location of the formation of a number of individual beings, interacting with each other, in the real space of being taken in its entirety.

What seems to be of key importance for Witkiewicz's conception of creative process is the ontological notion of the subconscious background for the sensory impressions emerging in the experiencing subject's focus of attention. Such a background is supposed to be a repository of constituent parts for a painterly or a literary work created in the pure form. In the third chapter I discuss the special character of this conception of the subconscious,

which was inferred from Cornelius' philosophy, and compare it with Bergson's theory of memory. In the chapters three and four I also discuss Witkiewicz's critique of the phenomenological notion of the intentional act; the latter is reducible, according to Witkiewicz, to the cluster of elementary data, bodily impressions inclusive, endowed with the character of anticipation. This notion of anticipation prompts me to ascribe – in the context of Witkiewicz's solutions in aesthetics – the bodily aspects both to the process of creating an artwork and to the process of its reception.

The hypothesis of an affinity between the concept of the double spatial-temporal form of being and the concept of the pure form of an artwork inspires me to describe, in the third chapter of the dissertation, Witkiewicz's model for an artwork as a diagram of intersection between the real spaces belonging to individual beings. Composition of this kind would present the fragment of an all-encompassing architecture of being, described by Witkiewicz as the "functional dependence between Everything and Everything", whose particular segments would be filled with clusters of sensory data belonging to durations of numerous individual beings. In the third chapter I also formulate the thesis, according to which the subjective aspect of the real space belonging to the individual being is expressed in Witkiewicz's pictures by optical means and the objective aspect of the infinite real space embracing being in its entirety is expressed with the help of the conceptual means – insofar as concepts are evoked in Witkiewicz's pictures by the idiomatic course of a line.

The possibility of transgressing the optical order in Witkiewicz's painting is presented in chapter four. It provides the space of confrontation between Witkiewicz's consideration of painting and the theories of image worked out by Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze. This confrontation exposes the bodily theme in Witkiewicz's ontology and triggers the in-depth analysis of the tactile dimension of the processes of creating an artwork and its reception. This confrontation also exposes the bodily aspect of the very notion of the unity of personality; according to Witkiewicz, tactile sensations, both internal and external, are constituent parts of all other experiences, conceptual processes inclusive, in the psychic development of an individual being.

In addition to that, in the fourth chapter of the dissertation I situate Witkiewicz's diagnosis of the total adequacy of the self-presentation of personality, given "in and for itself" in tactile sensations, between – on the one hand – Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the partial transparency of the embodied subject of perception to itself, the subject inscribed in the

process of differentiation of the shapes of things, and – on the other – Deleuze’s description of the “body without organs” conceived as transgressing, on the level of sensation, its own limits in the process of immanent becoming. I also confront the bodily iconography decipherable in Witkiewicz’s paintings with the iconography of an intensive body recognized by Deleuze in the paintings of Francis Bacon. I compare the structure of a diagram recognized by Deleuze in Bacon’s paintings with Witkiewicz’s model of a painterly composition as the arrangement of directional tensions, considering at the same time the relation between the conception of immanent becoming and the concept of the unity of personality.

The operation of endowing Witkiewicz’s ontology with a spatial character, enacted in this dissertation by means of confronting the linear structure of his visual works with the theses of his ontology, does not result, and – in principle – could not result in discovering such ontological ideas which he had not already formulated in his texts. This spatialization highlights, instead, the most important aspect, it seems, of the project of painting submitted to the principles of pure form – its ability to visualize and to stimulate, in the state of the unity of personality, the experience of the infinite complexity of being. In other words, it is in this experience that the “infinity of being” is to manifest itself in its perpetual change, impossible to describe by means of clearly defined concepts, susceptible to be felt, however, in the process of perceiving the multi-oriented forms, courses of the line, juxtapositions of color and – at times – in ambiguity of verbal commentaries accompanying Witkiewicz’s pictures. In his ontological system, Witkiewicz regarded the concept of being as basic and indefinable; my work leads to the conclusion according to which what could serve as the content of this concept is the cosmic complexity and changeability of being, experienced – in the case of each individual being and on each occasion – in a unique way.